

# The HILLMAN

A Story About an Experiment With Life

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

## CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

The reception in honor of the little company of French tragedians, at which almost the whole of the English stage and a sprinkling of society people were present, was a complete success. Louise made a charming hostess, and Sir Edward more than ever justified his reputation for saying the right thing to the right person at the right moment. The rooms were crowded with throngs of distinguished people, who all seemed to have plenty to say to one another.

The only person, perhaps, who found himself curiously ill at ease was John. He heard nothing but French on all sides of him—a language which he read with some facility, but which he spoke like a schoolboy. He had been wandering about for more than an hour before Louise discovered him. She at once left her place and crossed the room to where he was standing by the wall.

"Cheer up!" she begged, with a delightful smile. "I am afraid that you are being bored to death. Will you not come and be presented to our guests?"

"For goodness' sake, no!" John implored. "I have never seen one of them act, and my French is appalling. I am all right, dear. It's quite enough pleasure to see you looking so beautiful, and to think that I am going to be allowed to drive you home afterward."

Louise looked into a neighboring mirror, and gazed critically at her own reflected image. She had a curious feeling that at that precise moment she had reached the zenith of her power and her charm. Her audience at the theater had been wonderfully sympathetic, had responded with rare appreciation to every turn of her voice, to every movement and gesture. The compliments, too, which she had been receiving from the crowds who had bent over her fingers that night had been no idle words.

She was conscious, acutely conscious, of the atmosphere she had created around her. She was glowing in the subtle outward signs of it. She was in love with herself; in love, too, with this delightful new feeling of loving. It would have given her more joy than anything else in the world, in that moment of her triumph, to have passed her arm through John's, to have led him up to them all, and to have said:

"After all, you see, I am a very simple sort of woman. I have done just the sort of simple thing that other women do, and I am glad of it—very glad and very happy!"

Her lips moved to the music of her thoughts. John leaned toward her.

"Did you say anything?" he asked.

"No, dear, of course I did not! Or if I did, it was just one of those little whispers to oneself which mean nothing, yet which count for so much. Can I not do anything to make you enjoy yourself more? I shall have to go back to my guests now. We are expecting a royal personage, and those two dears who keep so close to my side do not speak a word of English."

"Please go back, dear," John begged promptly. "It was nice of you to come at all. And here's Sophie at last, thank goodness! Now I am all right."

She laid her fingers upon his arm.

"You must take me back to my place," she said. "Then you can go and talk nonsense to Sophie."

They were back in the crowd now, and she dismissed him with a little nod. He made his way quickly to the spot where he had seen Sophie. To his disappointment, she had disappeared. Graillet, however, came up and seized him by the arm.

"Still playing the moth, my young friend?" he exclaimed. "Aren't the wings sufficiently burned yet?"

"I am afraid it's become a permanent role," John replied, as the two men shook hands. "Where have you been all these weeks, and why haven't you been to see me?"

"Paris, my dear young friend—Paris and life! Now I am back again—I am not sure that I know why. I came over with these French people, to see them start their theater. Forgive me, I have not paid my respects to our hostess. We shall meet again presently."

He strolled off, and a few minutes later John found Sophie.

"How late you are!" he grumbled.

"I couldn't help it," she answered. "This is the only evening dress I possess at present, and I had to mend it before it was decent to come out in. Why are you wandering about alone? Haven't Louise been kind to you?"

"She has been charming," John declared promptly, "but she is surrounded with all sorts of people I don't know. I can't help her. For one thing, my French is absurd. Then they are all talking about things which I don't understand in the least."

Sophie remained silent for a moment. Then she took John's arm and led him to the buffet.

"Give me an ice and a cigarette, will you, please? You are a dear, impractical person, but you are as much out of this world as a human being well could be!"

John waited upon her without any further remark. The prince of Seyre, passing through, bowed to them. John looked after his retreating figure. An irresistible impulse seized him.

"Sophy," he asked, sitting down by her side, "tell me, why have the prince and Louise always been such great friends?"

Sophie looked steadfastly at her ice. "I suppose because the prince is a very clever and cultivated person," she said. "He has been of great assistance to Louise several times. It was he who rescued Milos Faraday

when he put on this play of Graillet's. Graillet hasn't a penny, you know, and poor Milos was almost broke after three failures."

"That was just an investment," John remarked irritably. "He will get his money back again."

"Of course," Sophie agreed. "I think the prince generally manages to get value for what he does in life."

"You don't think Louise ever thought of caring for him, do you?" John persisted.

Sophie paused until she had lit a cigarette. The expression in her face, when she looked up at John, irritated him vaguely. It was as if she were talking to a child.

"I think," she said, "you had better ask Louise that question yourself, don't you?"

He asked it an hour or so later, when at last the party of guests had taken their leave, and somewhat to the well-bred surprise of the one or two friends who lingered, Louise had beckoned to John to take her out to her car. Her hand had sought his at once, her head rested a little wearily but very contentedly upon his shoulder.

"Louise, dear," he began, "I asked Sophie a question tonight which I ought to have asked you. Quite properly, she told me so."

"Nice little soul, Sophie!" Louise murmured. "What was it, John?"

"Once or twice I have wondered," he went on, "whether you have ever cared in any sort of way, or come near to caring, for the prince of Seyre?"

For a moment she made no movement. Then she turned her head and looked at him. The sleepy content had gone from her eyes.

"Why do you ask?"

"Isn't it quite a natural question from a jealous man who believes that everyone who sees you must be in love with you? You have seen a great deal of the prince, haven't you, in the last few years? He understands your art. There are many things that you and he have in common."

Louise was looking out of the window at the thin stream of people still passing along Piccadilly. She seemed suddenly to have become only the shadow of her former brilliant self.

"I think that once—perhaps twice," she confessed, "I came very near to caring for him."

"And now?"

"And now," she repeated, suddenly gripping John's hands, "I tell you that I am very much nearer hating him. So much for the prince! In ten minutes we shall be at home, and you are such a dear stupid about coming in. You must try to say all the nice things in the world to me quickly—in ten minutes!"

"How shall I begin?" he whispered. She leaned once more toward him.

"You don't need any hints," she murmured. "You're really quite good at it!"

CHAPTER XX.

The ten minutes passed very much too quickly. She was gone, and John, thrilled though he was through all his senses by the almost passionate fervor of her leave-taking, found himself once more confronted by that little black demon. There was something about all of them, all these people whom he knew to be his friends, which seemed to him to savor of a conspiracy. There was nothing that could be put into definite shape—just the ghost of torturing, impossible thoughts. There was in no humor to go home. Changing the order he had first given to the chauffeur, he was driven instead to a small Bohemian club which he had joined at Graillet's instigation. He had a vague hope that he might find the great dramatist there. There were no signs of him, however, in the smoking room, or anyone else whom John knew.

He threw himself into an easy chair and ordered a whisky-and-soda. Two men close at hand were writing at desks; others were lounging about, discussing the evening's reception. One man, sitting upon the table, a recognized authority, was treating the company to a fluent dissertation upon modern actresses, winding up by contrasting Louise Maurel's style with that of her chief French rival, John found himself listening with pleased interest. The man's opinion was certainly not unfavorable to Louise.

"It is only in the finer shades of emotionalism," the critic declared,

"that these French actresses get at a little more completely even than Louise Maurel. Do you know the reason? I'll tell you. It is because they live the life. They have a dozen new emotions in a season. They make a cult of feeling. They use their brains to dissect their passions. They cut their own life into small pieces and give us the result without concealment. That is where they score, if anywhere. This Mme. Latrobe, who opens over here tomorrow night, is in love at the present moment with Jean Tourbet. She had an affair with that Italian poet in the summer, so they tell me. She was certainly in Madrid in October with Bretoldi, the sculptor. These men are all great artists. Think what she must have learned from associating with them! Now Louise Maurel, so far as we know, has never had but one affair, the prince of Seyre, and has been faithful to him all the time."

It was out at last! John had heard it spoken in plain words. The black demon upon which his hand had lain so heavily, was alive now, without a doubt, jeering at him, mocking at him—alive and self-assertive in the sober words of the elderly, well-bred man who lounged upon the table.

For a moment or two John was stunned. A wild impulse assailed him to leap up and confront them all, to choke the lie back down the throat of the man who had uttered it. Every nerve in his body was tingling with the desire for action. The stupor of his senses alone kept him motionless, and a strange, incomprehensible clarity of thought. He realized exactly how things were. This man had not spoken idly, or as a scandal-monger. He had spoken what he had accepted as a fact, what other people believed.

John rose to his feet and made his way toward the door. His face showed little sign of disturbance. He even nodded to some men whom he knew slightly. As he passed down the stairs, he met Graillet. Then once more his self-control became in danger. He seized the Frenchman savagely by the arm.

"Come this way," he said, leading him toward the card-room. "Come in here! I want to speak to you."

He locked the door—a most unheard-of and irregular proceeding. Graillet felt the coming of the storm.

"Well!" he exclaimed grimly. "Trouble already, eh? I see it in your face, young man. Out with it!"

"I was sitting in the smoking room there, a few moments ago," he began, jerking his head toward the door. "There were some men talking—decent fellows, not dirty scandal-mongers. They spoke of Louise Maurel!"

Graillet nodded gravely. He knew very well what was coming.

John felt his throat suddenly dry. The words he would have spoken choked him. He banged his fist upon the table by the side of which they were standing.

"Look here, Graillet," he cried, almost pleadingly. "You know it is not true, nor likely to be true! Can't you say so?"

"Stop, my young friend!" the Frenchman interrupted. "I know nothing. It is a habit of mine to know nothing when people make suggestions of that sort. I make no inquiries. I accept life and people as I find them."

"But you don't believe that such a thing could be possible?"

"Why not?" Graillet asked steadily.

John could do no more than mumble a repetition of his words. The world was falling away from him.

"I will not discuss this matter with you, my friend. I will only ask you to remember the views of the world in which we live. Louise Maurel is an artist, a great artist. If there has been such an affair as you suggest, between her and any man, it is something which appealed to her affections, it is my opinion that she would not hesitate. You seem to think it an outrageous thing that the prince should have been her lover. To be perfectly frank, I do not. I should be very much more surprised at her marriage."

John made his escape somehow. He remembered opening the door, but he had no recollection of reaching the street. A few minutes later, however, he found himself striding down Piccadilly toward Hyde Park corner.

He found a taxicab and was driven toward the Milan. He was conscious of a wild desire to keep away from his rooms. Every pulse in his body was tingling. He was fiercely awake, eager for motion, action, excitement of any sort. Suddenly he remembered the night club to which he had been introduced by Sophie on the first night of his arrival in London. The address, too, was quite clearly in his disordered brain. He leaned out of the cab and repeated it to the driver.

The little place was unexpectedly crowded when he entered, after having handed his hat and coat to a vestriane. A large supper party was going on at the farther end, and the dancing space was smaller than usual. The maître d'hôtel was escorting John to a small table in a distant corner, which had just been vacated, when the latter heard his name suddenly called by a familiar voice. Sophie, who had been dancing, abandoned her partner precipitately and came hurrying up to John with outstretched hands.

"John!" she exclaimed. "You, of all people in the world! What do you mean by coming here alone at this time of night? Fancy not telling me! Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing," he replied. "I really don't exactly know why I am here. I simply don't want to go to bed."

"Where is the prince?" she asked.

Sophie, struck by something in his voice, swung around and looked at him. Then she thrust both her hands through his, clasped her two hands together, and led him firmly away. A glimmering of the truth was beginning to dawn upon her.

"Tell me where you have been since you left the reception," she insisted, when at last they were seated together.

"Wait till I have ordered some wine," he said.

A waiter served them with champagne. When John's glass was filled, he drained its contents. Sophie watched him with surprise. She came a little closer to him.

"John," she whispered, "you must tell me—do you hear? You must tell me everything! Did you take Louise home?"

"Yes."

"What happened, then? You didn't quarrel with her?"

"Nothing at all happened," he assured her. "We parted the best of friends. It wasn't that."

"Then what? Remember that I am your friend, John, dear. Tell me everything."

"I will tell you," he assented. "I went to a little club I belong to on the Adelphi Terrace. I sat down in the smoking room. There was no one there I knew. Some men were talking. They had been to the reception tonight. They were comparing French actresses and English. They spoke first of the French woman, Latrobe, and her lovers; then of Louise. They spoke quite calmly, like men discussing history. They compared the two actresses, they compared their lives. Latrobe, they said, had lovers by the score—Louise only one."

Sophie's hand stole into his. She was watching the twisting of his features. She understood so well the excitement underneath.

"I think I can guess," she whispered. "Don't hurt yourself telling me. Something was said about the prince?"

His eyes blazed down upon her.

"You, too," he muttered. "Does the whole world know of it and speak as if it did not matter? Sophie, is it true? Speak out! Don't be afraid of hurting me. You call yourself my friend. I've been down, looking at the outside of her house. I dared not go in. There's a fire burning in my soul! Tell me if it is true!"

"You must not ask me that question, John," she begged. "How should I know? Besides, these things are so different in our world, the world you haven't found out much about yet. Supposing it were true, John, she went on, "remember that it was before you knew her. Supposing it should be true, remember this—your idea of life is too absurd. Is one creed made to fit human beings who may differ in a million different ways? A woman may be as good as any ever born into the world, and yet take just a little love into her life, if she be true and faithful in doing it. I don't believe there is a dearer or sweeter woman breathing than Louise, but one must have love. Don't I know it? A man may be strong enough to live without it, but a woman—never!"

The skirts of the women brushed their table as they danced, the rhythm of the music rose and fell above the murmur of laughter and conversation. John looked around the room, and a sort of despair crept in upon him. It was no good! He had come to London to understand; he understood nothing. He was made of the wrong stuff. If only he could change himself! If it were not too late! If he could make himself like other men!

"I must not ask you any more questions, Sophie," he said. "You are my friend, and you have spoken very sweetly. Tomorrow I will go and see her."

"And tonight, forget it all," she pleaded. "Wipe it out of your memory. Tonight she is not here, and I am. Even if you are furiously in love

with her, there isn't any harm in your being just a little nice to me. Give me some champagne; and I want some caviar sandwiches!"

"I wonder why you are so good to me, Sophie?" he exclaimed, as he gave the order to a waiter. "You ought either to marry your young man down at Bath, or to have a sweetheart of your own, a companion, some one quite different."

"How different?"

"Someone who cared for you as you deserve to be cared for, and whom you cared for, too."

CHAPTER XXI.

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As he struggled to his feet, he saw with a little shock that he was not alone. Sophie Gerard was curled up in his easy chair, still in evening clothes, her cloak drawn closely around her, as if she were cold. Her head had fallen back. She, too, was asleep. At the sound of his movement, however, she opened her eyes

and looked at him for a moment with a puzzled stare. Then she jumped to her feet.

"Why, we have both been asleep!" she murmured, a little weakly.

At the sound of her voice it all came back to him, a tangled, hideous nightmare. He sat down again upon the couch and held his head between his hands.

"I remember everything that happened at the club," he went on slowly. "Is the prince dead?"

She shook her head.

"Of course not! He was hurt, though, and there was a terrible scene of confusion in the room. The people crowded around him, and I managed, somehow, to drag you away. The manager helped us. To tell the truth, he was only too anxious for you to get away before the police arrived. He was so afraid of anything getting into the papers. I drove you back here, and as you still seemed stunned, I brought you upstairs. I didn't mean to stay, but I couldn't get you to say a single coherent word. I was afraid to leave you alone!"

"I suppose I was drunk," he said, in a dull tone. "I remember filling my glass over and over again. There is one thing, though," he added, his voice

"It is a gala night with me," John replied, his tone raised no more than usual, but shaking with some new quality. "Drink a glass of wine with me, prince," he invited, taking the bottle from the ice-pail and filling a tumbler upon the table. "Wish me luck, won't you? I am engaged to be married!"

"I wish you happiness with all my heart," the prince answered, holding his glass up. "May I not know the name of the lady?"

"No doubt you are prepared for the news," John told him. "Miss Maurel has promised to become my wife."

The prince's hand was as steady as a rock. He raised his glass to his lips.

"I drink to you both with the greatest of pleasure," he said, looking John full in the face. "It is a most remarkable coincidence. Tonight is the anniversary of the night when Louise Maurel pledged herself to me."

John's frame seemed for a moment to dilate, and fire flashed from his eyes.

"Will you be good enough to explain those words?" he demanded.

The prince bowed. He glanced toward Sophie.

"Since you insist!" he replied. "Tonight, then, let me tell you, is the anniversary of the night when Louise Maurel consented to become my—"

What followed came like a thunder-clap. The prince reeled back, his hand to his mouth, blood dropping upon the tablecloth from his lips, where John had struck him. He made a sudden spring at his assailant. Sophie, shrieking, leaped to her feet. Everyone else in the place seemed paralyzed with wonder.

John seized the prince by the throat, and held him for a moment at arm's length. Then he lifted him off his feet as one might lift a child from the floor. Holding his helpless victim in a merciless grip, he carried him across the room and deliberately flung him over the table toward his empty chair.

Sophie held John by the arm, clutching it hysterically, striving to drag him away. But to John the room was empty. He stood there, a giant, motionless figure, his muscles still taut, his face tense, his eyes aflame, glaring down at the prostrate figure of the man on whom he had wreaked the accumulated fury of these last days and weeks of madness.

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"I cannot take these things as lightly as I used to," she answered a little sadly. "Something has come over me lately—I don't know what it is—but I seem to have lost my taste for flirtations. John, don't look up, don't turn round! I have been afraid of the prince all the evening. When you came in, I fancied that you had been drinking. When the prince asked me something about you, an hour or so ago, I knew that he had. I saw him like it once before, about a year ago. Don't take any notice of him! Don't talk to him, if you can at all help it!"

Toward their table the prince was slowly making his way, skillfully avoiding the dancers, yet looking neither to the right nor to the left. His eyes were fastened upon John. If he had been drinking, as Sophie suggested, there were few signs of it. His walk was steady; his bearing, as usual, deliberate and distinguished.

He came to a standstill beside them. Sophie's fingers clutched at the tablecloth. The prince looked from one to the other.

"You have robbed me of a guest, Mr. Strangeway," he remarked; "but I bear you no ill-will. It is very seldom that one sees you in these haunts of dissipation."

"It is a gala night with me," John replied, his tone raised no more than usual, but shaking with some new quality. "Drink a glass of wine with me, prince," he invited, taking the bottle from the ice-pail and filling a tumbler upon the table. "Wish me luck, won't you? I am engaged to be married!"

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